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For Sale: A Mansion With a Grand View And a Spooky Past

CIA's Hideaway in Maryland
Once Harbored Defectors
From Iron Curtain Lands

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ROYAL OAK, Md.—If walls could talk—and local rumor has it that thanks to the magic of electronic bugging, these walls once could—what tales Ashford Farm could tell.

The sprawling old mansion, tucked away on the edge of Maryland's Eastern Shore, out of sight of neighboring estates and reachable only by a winding, one-lane access road about a third of a mile long, was once one of the "safe houses" used by the Central Intelligence Agency to house important defectors from Communist countries.

In its time it has shielded from prying eyes such guests as East German atomic scientist Heinz Barwich, KGB defector Peter Deriabin and Reino Hayhanen, another KGB defector who was the chief witness against Soviet master spy Col. Rudolph Abel. Others have included lesser-known Russians, Poles, East Germans, Chinese and Bulgarians who were on the lam from their native lands.

Francis Gary Powers also stayed here briefly after the Soviets traded the captured U-2 spy-plane pilot back to the U.S. in return for Col. Abel. In fact, it was Mr. Powers's presence here, while the nation's press was engaged in an all-out attempt to find him, that finally blew Ashford Farm's cover.

Today, Ashford Farm, with its park-like setting of 62 acres overlooking the tidal Choptank River near the point where it spills into Chesapeake Bay, is up for sale. It's likely that the government would be willing to give the place away if it could find a suitable nonprofit organization to take it.

Unloading an Elephant.

For the truth is that Ashford Farm is something of a white elephant. It has been vacant, except for a caretaker couple, since 1976, when the CIA apparently decided the house was too far from Washington or had become too well known and turned it over to the General Services Administration, the official agency for disposing of government-owned property. The GSA has been trying unsuccessfully to unload it ever since.

A room-by-room inspection reveals some of the reasons. The red-brick main building is certainly big enough—8,688 square feet of floor area on two floors, with eight bedrooms and seven baths, plus a four-car garage. But its architectural style can best be described as "bad bogus Tudor." The once impressive circular driveway in front of the mansion now is almost completely grassed over. The roof of the house leaks, the green-painted wood trim is peeling, and the interior walls seem to have been finished by spreading a stucco-like substance over wall-board so thinly that in places the seams are visible. Just to keep the place from deteriorating further costs the government about \$18,000 a year.

Nevertheless, the four auctions of the farm conducted so far by the GSA have attracted more than 60 bidders. Some of the bids, such as those of John R. Porter of Severna Park, Md., (\$210) and Eugene Batis of San Francisco (\$10), apparently were based on a mistaken belief that the government was so desperate to dispose of the property that it would sell at any price. Most of the other bids were at more realistic levels, although not quite up to the GSA's own undisclosed estimate of the farm's true value. A local real-estate man believes Ashford should sell for \$475,000 to \$550,000.

A Problem on the River

There was one successful bid—of \$550,000—in 1979 by A.G. Proctor Inc., a Georgia real-estate firm. "We bought it for speculation," says A.G. Proctor, the firm's head. Then, he says, Hurricane David "came and took about 800 feet of the shoreline"—leading to the discovery that an estimated \$800,000 was needed to protect Ashford's 3,600-foot frontage on the Choptank River.

Mr. Proctor backed out, and the GSA says it then spent about \$100,000 on ripraps (stone revetment) to protect the house. Unriprapped shoreline continues to fall into the Choptank, giving pause to prospective buyers.

For much of its existence, Ashford has stood vacant. It was built in the late 1920s by a family that came from Pittsburgh. "The man who built it had a mortgage, and he couldn't keep up the payments. For about 20 years nobody lived in it. Then my parents bought it from the bank for about \$35,000 or \$40,000," says John Todd, a local resident. He says his mother "just bought it to kind of fix it up" and kept it only a year or two.

The CIA entered the local scene in 1951 when Peter Sivess, who now is retired from

his former job as head of the CIA's alien branch, bought Ashford for the agency from the Todds for \$65,000.

Most of the time Ashford Farm was run by a succession of CIA resident managers. Mr. Sivess would come out from Washington when there was a special problem or an important defector, and his wife and son once lived at the mansion for a year and a half when his own home in Cheverly, Md., was being occupied by a diplomatic defector.

Mr. Sivess, a big, gruff man whose long government career, first with the Navy and then the CIA, was preceded by two and a half years as a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, has vivid memories of many of the government's guests from overseas who were put up at Ashford Farm. Some were "phonies," he says, and "some of what we learned was garbage. One fellow gave us stuff he had read in a book."

Furthermore, Mr. Sivess says, "there's got to be something wrong with them someplace" or they wouldn't have defected. "Anybody who sells his country down the river is a snake," he adds.

There were behavioral problems, too. Mr. Sivess remembers one KGB defector who put away 30 ounces of vodka a day and had a wife who was hooked on peach brandy. "A couple lost their marbles," he says, and some redefected. They learned that America "is not a paradise," he observes.

Mr. Sivess's wife, Eleanor, was sometimes pressed into service to deal with difficult wives. She recalls an East German woman who had married a Soviet officer she had met as a maid in the officers' barracks. The woman was difficult to deal with at Ashford, refusing to obey her doctor's orders after a complicated childbirth. "That woman could very well have been a lady of the street," says Mrs. Sivess matter of factly.

Mr. Sivess says that he ran Ashford "on a shoestring," furnishing it with secondhand furniture and getting its transient residents to help out by painting, gardening and raising chickens and pigs. "They had good food and clean beds," says Mrs. Sivess. Mr. Sivess indicates that the Spartan way of life was by design since his job was to get his charges "off on their own as quickly as possible." They were tutored in English and often coached for job-hunting efforts.

Some became friends, particularly Nicholas Shadrin, a Soviet naval officer who defected in Poland with his wife-to-be in 1958. Mr. Shadrin eventually went to work for the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency and then is said to have become a double agent for the FBI before he disappeared in 1975, presumably kidnapped by the KGB. Although Mr. Sivess concedes that Mr. Shadrin may have been a Soviet agent all along, he says, "He was practically a member of my family. He was my type, an outdoorsman. We hunted. We fished."